# *Female board directors' resilience against gender discrimination*

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# Female board directors' resilience against gender discrimination

Rita Goyal[1] | Nada Kakabadse[2] | Andrew Kakabadse[3] | Danielle Talbot[4]

[1]School of Strategy and Leadership, Coventry Business School, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

[2]Policy, Governance and Ethics, Henley Business School, University of Reading, Reading, UK

[3]Governance & Leadership, Henley Business School, University of Reading, Reading, UK

[4]Student Experience, Faculty of Business and Law, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

**Correspondence**
Rita Goyal, School of Strategy and Leadership, Coventry Business School, Coventry University, Coventry, UK.
Email: rita.goyal@coventry.ac.uk

## Abstract

Despite regulatory efforts to promote gender diversity on boards, women are still severely underrepresented in board leadership in the UK, beyond FTSE 100 companies. Evidence suggests that women, when poorly represented in the workplace, are more likely to suffer discrimination. In this study, we report the first-hand experiences of gender discrimination suffered by female directors and present the process of how they build resilience through developing coping strategies. Such resilience-building processes seem to vary with the length of board experience of female directors. At the outset of their board journey, they adopt avoidant coping strategies of denial and disengagement. However, with experience in boards, they gain the confidence to pursue the active coping strategy of seeking and extending support. This qualitative study is based on 42 elite interviews of board directors and is guided by the resilience theory, in the context of top FTSE boards. The article also discusses the contribution of the study to theory, praxis, and policy.

**KEYWORDS**
active and avoidant coping strategies, coping strategies, resilience processes

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Boards have traditionally been male-dominated entities (Martin et al., 2008). However, since 2008, the representation and treatment of women on boards (WoB) has become "a highly salient policy issue in the UK" (Gregory-Smith et al., 2014, p. 2). Several commissions constituted by the UK government (e.g., Higgs, 2003 ["Higgs Report"]; Tyson, 2003 ["Tyson Report"]) have recommended casting a wider net while recruiting board members (Adams, 2015). Other reports (such as Whitehead & Normand, 2011 ["Davies Report"]; Department for Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS], 2015 ["Davies Review"]; Hampton, 2016 ["Hampton-Alexander Review"]), and the UK Corporate Governance Code 2018 (Financial Reporting Council [FRC], 2018) recommend that top FTSE companies pursue time bound, voluntary targets for gender parity on boards. As of 2020, there are no all-male boards in FTSE 100 companies, and the proportion of WoB is almost 34% (Spencer Stuart, 2020 ["SSUKBI"]). However, boards of FTSE 350 and below continue to have poor representation of women.

Gabaldon et al. (2015) indicate that institutionalized gender discrimination against women can be the main cause of gender homogeneity of boards. In different country contexts, studies (e.g., Cabeza-García et al., 2019; North, 1990; Smith & Parrotta, 2018; Smith et al., 2018) claim that the skewed gender ratio on boards may be on account of a practice-based, informal yet institutionalized gender discrimination. Women often have to overcome higher barriers and undergo stricter scrutiny in order to obtain board positions (Singh & Vinnicombe, 2004). In a study on boardrooms of top listed companies of the UK, Goyal et al. (2017, pp. 5–7) point out the dichotomous challenge faced by aspiring women who are perceived as defying their prescriptive and descriptive roles. Furthermore, female executives who do not have elite backgrounds face significant challenges in reaching boardrooms (Westphal & Stern, 2006).

When poorly represented at the highest level of decision-making, women are disproportionately more likely to face situations in the workplace that require them to demonstrate resilience (GWO, 2020). In this qualitative study, we explore the resilience process of female directors of FTSE companies who have faced gender discrimination in boardrooms. The study findings are based on 42 elite interviews with board directors, 18 of whom are female. Female directors' perspectives are presented in the study, however, views of the male participants, where relevant to the inquiry, are made available in Annexure 3.

The rest of the article is structured as follows: We first present a critical review of the academic literature on resilience, coping, and the gender composition of top FTSE boardrooms in order to articulate the research gap. We then discuss the sample selection, data collection, and analysis methods adopted in the study, followed by a presentation of the findings which are discussed with reference to literature from organizational psychology on individual resilience. We conclude the article with the contributions of the study, its limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## 2 | RESILIENCE AND COPING

"Resilience" refers to individuals ability to rebound, learn, and transform in the face of severe disruption (Bhamra et al., 2011; Witmer, 2019), an inclusive space where individuals can be creative, empowered, and where power is shared (Witmer, 2019). In management literature, "resilience" is defined as the ability to *adapt* to adversity demonstrated as a trait, capacity, or process (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Simply put, an individuals' resilience is about bouncing back from an experience of adversity, and recovery with positive outcomes (Liu et al., 2017). Resilient individuals cope in the face of adversity and environmental challenges and develop the capacity to maintain psychological and physical well-being (Masten, 2001). Such individuals develop the ability to recover from stress-induced intervals and regain their normal functionality level (Carver, 1998; Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). Their coping mechanism enables them to defy the expectations of negative outcomes (Bonanno, 2004; Liu et al., 2017).

A resilient individual adapts and responds to the stressor in several ways, such as accepting the new reality, or improvising through effective coping strategies (Coutu, 2002). An individual's coping mechanisms may be functional or dysfunctional; however, positive coping mechanisms are likely to lead to increased resilience, therefore, coping and resilience, though distinct, are also related (Rice & Liu, 2016).

Individuals resilience approaches and resultant coping strategies may vary with context and hence need to be understood in those specific situations (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). The social context of workplace influences an individual's resilience and their ability to cope with adversity; yet occupational influence on individuals resilience is under-examined in the management literature (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016). Furthermore, an individual's resilience is generally described in terms of the "masculine" attributes of strength, bravery, boldness, and have been the subject of various studies, whereas the "feminine" approaches to resilience remain inadequately explored (Witmer, 2019). The mechanism needs to be understood from women's perspectives because they have distinct social, economic, and political roles, and they experience adversity differently to men (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). The concept needs to be theoretically developed, from female leaders perspectives, exploring its impact on their actions (Witmer, 2019). Analyzing organizational power structures from a resilience and gender perspective can further expose underlying fault lines and processes within the organization (Witmer, 2019). Additionally, Linnenluecke (2017) argues that the conceptual similarities and differences across streams and potential generalizable principles of developing resilience ought to be explored further. Therefore, in this article we explore the female perspective on resilience, against gender discrimination, and thereby challenge/supplement the dominant masculine discourse on resilience in the context of top FTSE boardrooms.

## 3 | FTSE BOARDROOMS AND THEIR GENDER COMPOSITION

Despite the distinction of having been governed by two female prime ministers (Nugent, 2016), historically, women in the UK were treated unequally, both in business and society (Holton, 1995; Kelly, 2006). Explicit gender discrimination has been prohibited in the UK through legislation such as the Married Women's Property Act 1870, Representation of the People Act 1928, Equal Pay Act 1970, Sex Discrimination (Prevention) Act 1975, and Equality Act 2010. Although the "silent revolution" for obtaining higher visibility for women has reached corporate leadership (Cabeza-Garcia et al., 2019), yet gender balance in FTSE boardrooms, with the exception of the largest 100 listed companies, remains severely skewed (Spencer Stuart [SSUKBI], 2019). In FTSE 150 companies, female directors constitute only 30.5%, with female executive directors (EDs.) a mere 8.3%. In FTSE 250 companies, 24 boards still have only 1 female director, seemingly confirming the concerns of "one and done," as expressed by the Hampton-Alexander report (2016). On FTSE 350 boards, the proportion of female directors is still under 20%, against the advised target of 33%, which was to be achieved by 2020 (Diversity, 2020; Hampton, 2016).

Mere regulation does not prevent women's systematic exclusion from positions of power (Piscopo & Clark Muntean, 2018). Gender stereotypes and male-dominated recruitment networks prevent even qualified and talented women from attaining top positions (Branson, 2008; Piscopo & Clark Muntean, 2018). A whole spectrum of gender discrimination—taste-based, statistical, and mistake-based—is reported to lead to poor representation of women in European boardrooms (De Cabo et al., 2011, 2012). Even when women secure a place in the highest echelons of corporate decision-making, an implicit bias against them may continue (Thomas, 2018). A lack of transparency in board recruitment processes may further compound the challenge (Vasiliou & Adams, 2018). Therefore, the question of how inequitable the experience of women in boardrooms is needs to be explored (Gregory-Smith, 2014, p. 2). A lack of understanding of women's challenges may have led to poor integration of women in historically male-dominated workplaces (Martin & Barnard, 2013). Therefore, an improved understanding may also help in changing the status quo.

In order to address women's vulnerabilities comprehensively, their ability to cope and develop resilience needs to be understood in their different contexts (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). In the female directors' context, reliable data are either not available or casual references are made without adequate explanation or discussion of causality (Adams, 2015). Therefore, we pursue this investigation through elite interviewing. Some argue that to question a person as to whether they have suffered discrimination in their life may not solicit an honest answer (e.g., De Cabo et al., 2011). However, we demonstrate that female directors are willing to share their experience. Moreover, researchers who understand the vocabulary and dynamics of leadership can interpret female directors' experiences reliably and robustly. This study is conducted by a team of three female and one male researchers who have decades of industry/leadership experience and have studied boardrooms extensively. Furthermore, the data collection and analysis methodology adopted in our study is in line with other studies on gender discrimination (e.g., Crosby, 1984). The elite interviewing and thematic data analysis approach has also been adopted in several boardroom studies (e.g., Pettigrew, 1992).

## 4 | METHODOLOGY

Board members are corporate elites; interviewing them can be categorized as elite interviewing (Pettigrew, 1992). Elite perspectives often differ from non-elite; hence, it is imperative to understand their social world (Kezar, 2003). Conducting interview-based qualitative studies on boards is a challenging task, as directors do not associate themselves with individuals or projects without the recommendation of someone they trust (Broome et al., 2011). Moreover, discrimination in boardrooms is a sensitive subject with potential legal ramifications. Considering the sensitivity of the topic, and exclusivity of the subjects of the study, we contend that it can only be addressed via face-to-face, one-to-one, anonymized elite interviews so that trust can be developed, and participants can share their experiences freely.

### 4.1 | Sample selection and data collection

We adopted purposive and chain referral strategies to select participants in the study, as conducted in other academic studies (e.g., Vasiliou & Adams, 2018).The purposiveness (Tongco, 2007) of the study's sample relates to board director experience of at least one FTSE 350 company as board Chair, CEO, Senior Independent directors (SID), Non-Executive (NEDs) or EDs. In the sample, participating EDs carry the designation of board director, routinely attend board meetings, and participate in boards' decision-making. More details of the attributes of participants can be seen in Annexure 1.

Potential participants were approached by the primary researcher (first author) from her network and also by using other networking opportunities (as also recommended in Miles & Huberman et al., 1994).The primary researcher has a two-decade long leadership experience in the telecommunication sector in India, and networks in commercial entities such as Associated Chamber of Commerce (ASSOCHAM) UK and the Institute of Directors (India/UK). Additionally, she also has family networks in boards of a few top FTSE companies in the UK. The researchers also took networking opportunities provided by the business school with which they were affiliated. All participants who agreed to be interviewed were requested to facilitate access to other similarly placed board members, whereby the contacts snowballed. The process of network and access to participants is shown in Annexure 4.

The primary researcher first approached potential participants in her network or during networking opportunities. Once participants agreed to be interviewed, the primary researcher sent emails to them giving details of the research, confirming that participants would be anonymized, and communicating that interviews would be audio-recorded. The potential participants responded, often through their personal secretaries/assistants, who in

turn scheduled interviews at mutually agreed times, communicating informed consent (as in Singh et al. [2011]). In all, 44 participants were approached via email. One participant declined to participate in the research. One participant omitted to be present for the interview and did not reschedule. Finally, 42 participants were interviewed.

Most interviews took place at the participants' workplace, three in restaurants, and two at the business school, for 60–90 min each. Interviews had a "reflexive and flexible" approach to questioning (Seierstad, 2016). An evolving interview protocol (Myers, 2013) was adopted where the interviewer posed open-ended questions to participants based on the two broad themes of (a) gender discrimination in boardrooms and (b) how female directors cope with it. Participants were first asked questions relating to their background and motivation to pursue board careers in order to understand the challenges, if any, of their board journey. The next set of questions were on participants' understanding of reasons for gender homogeneity of boardrooms and their experience of gender discrimination in boardrooms. If participants acknowledged gender discrimination in boardrooms, they were asked to share their experiences, if they were comfortable doing so. Both male and female participants were probed further on their answers to glean the meaning of vocabulary used by them and to ensure that our interpretation of their views is robust.

Data collection and analysis were carried out concurrently in order to seek information/data on any new and relevant themes emerging from the analyzed data (Singh et al., 2011). We continued to collect data until we reached data saturation (as also recommended by Blaikie [2009]).

## 4.2 | Data analysis

Qualitative research attempts to seek patterns in words in order to build a meaningful picture with human sense and subjectivity (Leung, 2015). In this study we followed the practice by coding and thematically analyzing the data. Interview recordings were first converted into transcripts by the primary researcher using the software InqScribe. The transcribed data were then disaggregated into conceptual units of a similar nature, which were given labels as first order codes and then further refined as second order themes, as recommended by Corley and Gioia (2004). Coding and analysis were done manually and the data were analysed thematically (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The reviewed literature also guided the coding process with codes such as "discrimination," "bias," "unconscious bias," and "coping." Moreover, participants' vocabulary was also used for coding and theme building such as "strategies (for coping)," "avoiding events." The thematic analysis method was chosen as it provides a deeper understanding of a phenomenon—in this study, discrimination—interpreted by the people living and experiencing that phenomenon (Shah & Corley, 2006). An example of a section of the coded transcript is in Annexure 3.

Data were first coded individually. We then compared codes, and memos written for interpreting those codes, and the most feasible/acceptable coding was used. An inductive approach (Ritchie et al., 2003) was adopted in this study—where research protocol shaped data collection and analyzed data led to development of the conceptual model presented in Figure 1.

As a way of robustness testing one participant was sent, via email, the analyzed transcript of their interview with request to validate our interpretation. The participant agreed that our interpretations/analysis was an accurate representation of their views and suggested some corrections in their designation and educational background, which were incorporated.

In response to the first interview themes (i.e., knowledge/experience of gender discrimination in boardrooms) all, except one, female participants responded in the affirmative. Two participants only acknowledged being aware of other female director(s) being subjected to it. Three male participants said they were aware of women suffering gender bias/discrimination and claimed that women faced formidable challenges in reaching boardrooms because of Chairs' and CEOs' bias toward women. However, male participants often preferred to use the term "unconscious bias."

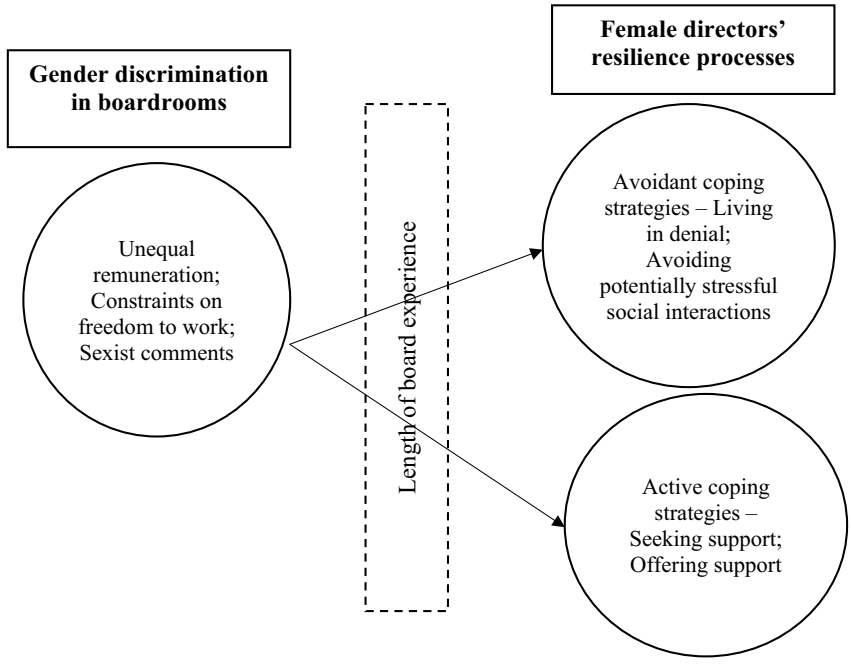


**FIGURE 1** Female board directors' resilience against gender discrimination. Source: Compiled by authors

Participants who acknowledged having suffered or being aware of gender discrimination in boards were then asked to share their experience. The experience of gender discrimination, as experienced by female participants, is presented in this article. A more comprehensive account of participants' experience/awareness of gender discrimination is available in Annexure 4.

Participants often did not mention discrimination as a cause of a board's gender homogeneity and did not acknowledge having experienced gender discrimination until asked explicitly. Female participants with longer board involvement shared their experience of gender discrimination more confidently and emphatically. Female participants with shorter board experience said they did not want to believe that they were discriminated against for their gender actively looking for an alternative explanation for discriminatory treatment they suffered. Female directors shared personal, deeply held stories of gender discrimination in boardrooms, and their journey of developing resilience—bouncing back from the experience and gradually gaining confidence to champion the cause.

The power equation in elite interview is significantly different from the equation in ethnography, as in the latter the interviewer may be empowering the interviewees by giving them voice (Kezar, 2003). In the elite interviews conducted in this study, participants shared the information voluntarily. All participants were corporate elites with agency on what they wanted to share and with the knowledge that they could recant their comments later. No participant withdrew from the study.

## 5 | FINDINGS

Analysis of the data in this research brings out rich patterns of themes; two main themes are discussed here. First, women's experience of gender discrimination in boardrooms and second, their resilience in coping with discriminatory environments. Coping strategies adopted by female directors, which are demonstrative of their resilience

process, are dynamic and vary with the directors' length of board experience. The findings are summarized in Figure 1, and then analysed in the next section.

## 5.1 | Gender discrimination in top FTSE boardrooms

Findings of the study indicate that women continue to experience gender discrimination even when holding board positions and this is most commonly characterized by unequal remuneration, constraints on their freedom to work independently, and inappropriate and/or sexist comments.

### 5.1.1 | Discriminatory remuneration

Gender discrimination in FTSE boardrooms appears to be more common than reported in the extant literature. Despite regulations to enforce it, and even when FTSE companies are being called out for a gender pay gap (The Equality Act 2010; Gender PayGapInformation Regulations 2017), female board members are denied equal remuneration to their male peers. A female director shares her experience as follows, which is representative of several others who were interviewed for this study:

> So, I ticked all those boxes. I am from the [name of the sector – known for being male-dominated] sector. I bring a lot of women's network. I do diversity well. And I know how to get businesses ready for sale… I was approached to be the finance director, the most senior female, the only female in the executive director role, with no pay rise! No change of anything! But having a whole bunch of men reporting to me, some of whom earned more[than me]! And they said, "Oh, we can't afford the pay rise to you." And then I heard from one gentleman, "Why would you need more money?" "Of course," I said, "for handbags!"(Participant A – NED/CFO/CEO/Partner/Director – HR)

Most female directors in the study, including Participant A, have illustrious educational/professional qualifications, often higher than their male counterparts, and more eclectic functional experience. However, an implicit bias seems to color the perception of male board members leading to their unethical and illegal actions/decisions. In the case presented above, the female director is not only refused a pay rise for her promotion, but is offered a lower remuneration than a few of her junior male colleagues, who report to her. The participant had to decline the offered board position and leave the organization. Receiving a lower financial remuneration than their male counterparts is repeatedly mentioned by female participants in the study, who perceived the phenomenon to be discriminatory and on account of their gender.

The findings of the study, though in a board context, support the extant knowledge which indicates that gender discrimination is a significant psychological barrier to women's professional success, and manifests in both overt and subtle mistreatment (Du Plessis & Barkhuizen, 2012). Due to gender discrimination, women are often given fewer challenging opportunities to prove their competence, and inequities in remuneration further limits their career advancement, particularly in traditionally male-dominated workplaces (Martin & Barnard, 2013). Our study findings affirm that the recent rise in WoBinFTSE 100 companies should not be allowed to cloud the status in not-so-visible firms (Souther & Yore, 2016).

We acknowledge that experiences of gender discrimination, as shared by participants in this research, can be interpreted as mere implicit bias rather than discrimination. However, extant knowledge argues that implicit bias is also a manifestation of discriminatory bias, which originates from discriminatory attitude and stereotyping (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006; Thomas, 2018).

### 5.1.2 | Constraint on professional independence

Another manifestation of discriminatory attitudes shown towards female board members is the unreasonable constraints imposed on their freedom to work. In the following example, a participant, the only female member of that board, is asked not to form an all-female team, with the "rationale" that it has "too many women." No male board member, including the Chair, objected to this sexist and discriminatory act of their fellow male colleague. The female board member shares her experience as follows:

> I was on the board of a [name of the industry] company. I was the only woman on the board. When we made an investment, we made a team, and we did the analysis and the research [before] we would make the investment, and then one of us would step on to the board of that company. So, I was investigating an investment into a company, and I was asked by one of the directors, who was I going to have in my team? I said that I was going to have two other women on my team. I said I am going to have A and B [names withheld] on my team. And he said, "You can't do that." And I said, "Why not?" He said, "because that's too many women in the team". He was completely serious!.. I left the room after the meeting, went into my office, and I burst into tears. Such a terrible shock that anyone would still think like that. That was one incident, and there were several like that. (Participant B – NED/CEO/ED)

In the experience shared above, the female board member had to concede to the (implied) superior authority of her male colleague (not her superior/Chairperson). Furthermore, the rationale offered by her male colleague is explicitly sexist, which perceives female directors and executives to be less competent than their male peers, and belittles their professional competence.

Extant literature also indicates that female directors are often asked for their input only on "soft" issues, such as human resources, occupational health and safety, corporate donations, and ethics, and not on technical issues, such as engineering (Rao & Tilt, 2016). Existing academic knowledge also suggests that due to traditional gender hierarchies and norms prevailing in society, women are generally disadvantaged in obtaining board positions in large firms (Hillman et al., 2002; Westphal & Stern, 2006). It is suggested that discriminatory underestimations of women's skills adversely impact their board recruitment, leading to poor board diversity (De Cabo et al., 2011). The findings of our study indicate that even after reaching boardrooms, women continue to face considerable barriers.

### 5.1.3 | Sexist comments

A final example in this section discusses explicit, unpleasant, and sexist comments made by male board members. The comments seem to suggest that female director sought to be deferential to their male colleagues, who can admonish the former for any deviation from perceived gender norms. As in the two examples presented earlier, the participant in the next case is also the only female director on the board. She shared her experience as follows:

> We had a situation about a week ago about a new department – does it reside in my team or does it reside in [male director's name's]jurisdiction. And we were opposed. Actually, it got quite heated. And quite emotional. I was getting cross. He was getting cross. And we had a very loud discussion. People overheard it. It wasn't very nice… I don't shy away from an argument. That is the strength of my character. I am quite happy to confront. But, I remember the closing comments my colleague made. He said, "See, I don't have this problem at home, X [participant's name]. Because my wife does as she is told."… Shocking really. (Participant C – Director – Operations)

In this example, the participant was arguing with her male colleague to secure control of a newly formed team—a perceived violation of her descriptive role of a demure and timid woman. She was not acknowledging the (implied) superior authority of her male colleague—a perceived violation of her prescriptive role of being compliant and deferential (Burgess & Borgida, 1999). Attributes often associated with women are warmth and niceness, which are perceived to be inconsistent with the masculine attributes of being assertive, ambitious, aggressive, independent, self-confident, daring, each considered essential for leadership positions (Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Rao & Tilt, 2016). The mismatch of stereotypes with the work roles leads to biased assessments of women's abilities and negative performance expectations from them (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). The findings of our study seem to affirm the extant literature and extends it to the boardroom context.

Our findings seem to contradict a small body of earlier research, which reports that overt gender discrimination "has evaporated" from UK businesses (Holton, 1995, p. 105), but are in line with a study conducted in the Norwegian board context (Mathisen et al., 2013) reporting that female directors are treated as "out-groups" by the male directors who are in a majority in boardrooms. Furthermore, our findings affirm the result of studies conducted in other country contexts (e.g., Hernandez, 2018) that female directors, when in a small minority, may experience more pronounced discrimination in boardrooms.

Gender discrimination and inequality meted out to women are known to make them vulnerable in crises arising out of power relations (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). And yet, several women have reached boardrooms of top listed companies in the UK (SSUKBI, 2020; Davies Review, 2015). Hence their effective strategies of addressing contextual vulnerabilities and developing resilience ought to be explored (Ravera et al., 2016).

## 5.2 | Resilience of female board directors and their coping strategies

Female directors in the study have continued their board journey despite gender discrimination even though a large number of women in middle management positions reportedly leave the workplace (Jackson, 2001). The continued presence of the female participants in boardrooms, despite the gender discrimination they experienced, is curious. Therefore, we ask them how they cope with the scenario and what mechanism they adopt to succeed. We find three main resilience processes that female directors develop for coping with unfair and discriminatory treatment. Such processes vary with their length of board experience. In their initial board journey, they often are in self-denial of being discriminated against for their gender, or dissociate from potentially sexist, discriminatory settings, becoming less participative. With longer board experience, they develop the confidence to champion the cause of board diversity. One participant described her learning as follows:

> I have sat on boards as a young finance director. I would probably be the only woman on board, and perhaps the youngest person on all-whitemale boards. I always felt like a bit of an outsider. I have always been aware of it, being a single, young, white woman in a white, male environment, and what that brings in, in terms of conversation and vocabulary and ways of thinking. So, I have dealt with a lot of this in my own career. I learned a lot of my own mechanisms of how I would approach them and how I would deal with that. (Participant D – NED/CFO/CEO)

An individual's resilience—their ability to adapt to stressful situations and survive, overcoming present and future challenges (Lian & Tam, 2014) can be a learned behavior, or strategies which one develops and follows in order to survive challenges and hardships (Jew et al., 1999). Individuals can also develop strategies to tolerate, escape, or minimize the effects of stress in order to cope with stressful situations successfully and recover from them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Steinhardt & Dolbier, 2008). Such strategies are aimed at reducing their discomfort by avoiding the cause of stress and often do not involve modifying their situation (Dumont &

Provost, 1999). These coping strategies shape the outcome of individuals' experiences of stressful situations and help them in minimizing the trauma (Weinberg et al., 2014).

Furthermore, our findings suggest that a female director's choice of coping strategy varies with the length of their board experience. Therefore, the findings support the extant literature, which claims that individuals' chosen coping strategy can be dynamic, and they might constantly recalibrate their response based on their perception of the stressor and their access to the coping mechanism (Carver et al., 1989). In the existing literature, coping strategies are broadly categorized as a) active—where an individual focuses on problem-solving; and b) avoidant—where an individual resorts to escaping a direct confrontation with the stressor (Wu et al., 2013). Individuals demonstrating higher resilience often employ more active coping and also seek social support (Li & Nishikawa, 2012; Wu et al., 2013).

### 5.2.1 | Avoidant coping strategy—denial, a cognitive distortion

In the initial stages of their board journey, female board members tend to be in self-denial, that they are subjected to discriminatory treatment because of their gender. Female directors adopt this coping strategy in order to avoid feeling demoralized or dejected, thereby continuing their board journey and not quitting their position. One participant who was repeatedly overlooked for the position of CEO—which went to her junior male colleague, a friend of the Chair—explains, with the example of her personal experience, as follows:

> So, gender had never been something that I would take to be a factor in anything. I would almost always look for some other conclusion, other than gender. I would never attribute anything to being a woman. So, for example, in [X country], quite interestingly that would have been the first time I would have faced an element of discrimination, but, I think that was more because I was English. So, in [X country], I had a bit of double whammy as a woman and somebody who was English. There were a number of people for whom being an English woman would be a complete anathema. Because I am English, I am an outsider anyhow. Pretty much everyone who works in [X country] is [from X country]. But in terms of attributing anything to gender, I have never attributed anything to gender… Because I don't want to feel that way. I don't want to be a victim. I don't want to be an underclass. I don't want to feel like I have been discriminated against. I just happen to be in a female form, I don't want to be defined by it… .

In response to our question, *"Is there a possibility that it [gender discrimination] might have been there but since you refuse to acknowledge it, you haven't been able to notice?"* she adds that there might have been, on account of an *unconscious* bias.

> Yes, there are possibilities. And ahead of this conversation I had a conversation with my husband. And there was a role that I went for a little while ago and I didn't get it. I do object to it because he was somebody that was known to the chairman. So the Chairman appointed the guy he knew… And while discussing it with my husband he said it could have been gender. But I don't want to feel that way. I don't want to be a victim…Having said that, I do think there is gender discrimination, I disapprove of even thinking about it, but I suspect there is an unconscious bias in appointing men. (Participant E – CEO/Director – Operations)

The process of developing coping strategies take places in three phases: becoming aware of the stressor, contemplating a response to address the stressful situation, and finally executing that response (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Denial of the existence of the stress or is the response emerging in the first phase—the

primary appraisal (Carver et al., 1989). Such a response can be useful in the initial stage of development of the stressor because it facilitates building resilience (Carver et al., 1989; Cohen & Lazarus, 1973). Participant E's response seems to be an avoidant coping strategy where the individual denies being discriminated against (Wu et al., 2013) and indicates the initial stage of developing resilience processes.

Furthermore, Participant E likes to avoid attributing her being denied the CEO position to gender discrimination, while acknowledging awareness of other women being discriminated against for their gender. Similarly, self-denial is observed from other female participants as well: they readily acknowledge gender discrimination against women as a group, but were more circumspect about having been subjected to it themselves. Evidence suggests that individuals subjected to discrimination often deny personal discrimination but more readily acknowledge group discrimination (e.g., Taylor et al., 1990). Scholars consider the phenomenon to be a cognitive distortion (Walster et al., 1973) and explain that it is a "symptom of people's need to believe in a just world," and "a just and orderly place even if one has suffered the sting of outrageous fate" (Crosby, 1984, pp. 374–375). Similarly, minority communities, such as black activists (Abeles, 1976) and Canadian francophones (Guimond & Dubé-Simard, 1983) are also reported to often deny any personal discrimination, while acknowledging discrimination against their community. Our findings suggest that the initial denial by participants, in early board careers, is due to their active denial of gender discrimination, and they seem to develop resilience to cope with the environment they cannot change and have to endure.

### 5.2.2 | Avoidant coping strategy—mental and physical disengagement

Another avoidant coping strategy that female board directors adopt in their early board career is avoiding professional settings where they are more likely to experience sexist comments and discriminatory treatment. A few female participants suggest that they hold back from expressing their views openly in boardrooms due to the fear of being ignored or ridiculed. Ironically, not contributing to board interactions may strengthen the flawed perception of male directors that female directors are less competent and/or less confident. Female participants also share that in order to escape discriminatory treatment they often avoid work-related socializing and in extreme cases even quit board positions. One participant shared the case of her former colleague who became a business partner, but suffered extreme sexist behavior in her initial board journey in a different organizations and withdrew from social gatherings completely.

> A colleague of mine in another part of [company name] here in the UK is a business partner now. Earlier, when they would have a leadership team outing, she was always annoyed because they[male colleagues] would only talk about cars. And every story somehow ends up with a naked woman in it, which makes her feel rather uncomfortable. Makes her not hang out with them until midnight and instead go to bed a little earlier. Because she doesn't need that. (Participant F – Director HR)

Avoiding work-related social gatherings, where often work is discussed and decisions are taken, has an adverse impact on their career progression. Participants A and B reported having quit boardrooms/boards in order to avoid discriminatory treatment and/or inappropriate behavior. Quitting or withdrawing further seems to compound the problem because it results in even fewer women participating in board decision-making and board processes. The avoidant coping strategy, as demonstrated by female directors in their early board journey, is a cognitive and behavioral response, which prevents the person from coming to terms cognitively, behaviorally, or emotionally with the problem (Joyce et al., 2005). The tendency to behaviorally disengage may reduce their efforts in dealing with the stressor when they feel helpless in changing the outcome or fear a poor outcome of the same (Carver et al., 1989).

Coping strategies are also categorized as emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping has three sub-categories: venting of emotions, behavioral disengagement, and mental disengagement (Carver et al., 1989). Emotion-focused coping strategies are aimed at managing or reducing the stress or emotional distress, that is, evoked by the threatening stressor (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). The strategy of denial and emotion-focused coping approaches seem to have been adopted by the participants in instances as represented so far in this section.

The third sub-section in this section discusses resilience of female directors with longer board experience, who seem to demonstrate a few active coping strategies.

### 5.2.3 | Active coping strategy—socializing and seeking support

With longer board experience, female directors seem to adopt more active and problem-focused coping strategies such as actively supporting and/or promoting gender diversity in leadership roles and even seeking gender-based quotas in boardrooms. Several experienced female board members are taking measures to promote gender parity in their organizations and create a welcoming and conducive environment for women in boardrooms. Participants argue that the most effective way to ensure that the challenge of gender discrimination is reduced/eliminated for the next generation of female directors is to ensure a higher gender diversity in boardrooms. Some of the measures being taken by these participants include:

- ensuring that paternity leave is implemented in their organization and availed by new fathers, thus diluting the notion that rearing a child is only a woman's responsibility;
- encouraging reframing of eligibility conditions (e.g., removing the clause on mandatory on-site work, and promoting off-site/work-from-home arrangements if the role permits) for leadership positions to ensure that women feel confident in applying for those jobs;
- organizing networks and events where young female leaders can find more experienced female mentors to bond with and learn from.

The construct of "queen bees"—the female corporate leaders who prevent other female aspirants from occupying positions of authority—to which some academic studies refer (e.g., Mavin &Williams, 2013; Staines et al., 1974), is not observed in our study. On the contrary, participants in this study explain that the discriminatory treatment suffered by them has made them resilient and make a difference by actively promoting gender diversity on boards.

> I sit on the nominations committee, so I get to choose from applications and also [monitor]what they're doing there. So, when we attend meetings, I ensure that there is always focus on diversity and inclusion to make sure that combinations and considerations that are being passed around are in keeping with the best practice. I ensure that steering groups are set up to see when a decision is taken, what is the basis; if anything has been eliminated; or not factored in, which should have been considered. (Participant G – NED/CEO/CFO)

A few participants in the study, who have illustrious board careers and an excellent reputation in their field, have been closely involved with regulatory/industry efforts to promote gender diversity on boards in the UK, such as the Davies Report (2011) and formation of the 30% Club. One such participant shares her disappointment with the recommendation of the Davies Report (2011) which stopped short of mandating gender-based quotas on boards:

> So, I started this. When I first went to see Mervin [Lord Davies], before he had written it, I was for quotas. And I still am! So, I think we [should] set the target and say that "we hope it [i.e., gender

> diversity on boards] is X% by this date. And if it's not X% then we will put in the quota". For me that's the best compromise. By the way, I don't know why we are starting with a lower number[i.e., 30%].The world is made up of 50% men and women. So, the boards should also be 50%. (Participant H – NED/CEO/ED)

Several participants express disappointment that mandatory quotas for WoB are not adopted in the UK and quote the examples of continental European countries, which have legislated for gender-based quotas. Most female participants expressed support for such a move for a limited period and claim a robust gender diversity on boards will check institutionalized gender discrimination, making gender-balanced boardrooms a self-sustaining phenomenon.

Senior female directors in the study seem to be demonstrating task-oriented (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) "problem-focused" coping strategies, dealing directly with the source of the stress in order to alter and deactivate the stressor. The problem-focused coping strategy involves confronting the problem and tackling it head on (Carver et al., 1989; Lian et al., 2014). This approach to coping also indicates the individuals' confidence in engaging with a wide range of problem-solving activities and their control over their behavior and emotions (Moos & Schaefer, 1993). Senior female directors in the study demonstrate confidence and adopt active, problem-focused coping strategies. Apart from actively promoting gender diversity in different hierarchies of their organizations they also seek regulatory support for helping aspiring female leaders reach boards. Seeking or providing social support to similarly placed individuals is a problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategy (Carver et al., 1989). Therefore, the findings of our study rein force the argument that despite being conceptually different, in practice, both strategies can co-occur in individuals (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lian & Tam, 2014). The findings further support the argument that the process of resilience-building through developing courage and resourcefulness can address historical inequalities and women's role in challenging structural limitations on their agency ought to be supported by government and practitioners in order to promote their sustainable development (Smyth & Sweetman, 2015). The participants in the study seem to be in line with a growing body of practitioners' literature reporting female directors' support for legislative quotas for WoB (Rednews, 2015).

### 5.2.4 | Other strategies—feminine advantage and changed appearance

One female participant in the study claimed that she did not consider the different treatment meted out to women as discrimination or a stressor. She claimed that she had an advantage, being a woman, in an overwhelmingly male-dominated environment and she got ahead by learning to use her gender as her "charm offensive" to obtain her objective. Comparing her advantage vis-à-vis her male colleague she explains:

> If anything, [my gendered experience has been] in the most positive sense. I had a male colleague in a similar role. And it was always easier for me to get my internal customer to do what I needed them to do. I have always liked working with men and being in teams with them. As long as you are competent and you know to play the female card, to say 'flirting' would be saying too much, but with an underlying charm offensive, that works very well on most men. So as long as it is mixed with professionalism, I have always found that working very well for me. (Participant I – Director – Operations)

Although the strategy is adopted by just one participant in the study, we present it here because it demonstrates the participant's resilience: her ability to react to stressful situations, by learning to respond/adapt to it, and survive, overcoming the challenges (Jew et al., 1999). The participant had very recently begun her board journey and her response could be originating from a lack confidence in being effective as a director without having to "*play the female card*." Existing management/governance literature does not address the topic adequately; however,

literature in other disciplines suggest that a few women have acute appreciation of their femininity which they integrate into their work identity in order to cope with potentially stressful environments (Martin & Barnard, 2013). The "tend-and-befriend" approach of socializing with potential stressors in order to minimize their threat value is a well-established strategy of developing stress tolerance (Joyce et al., 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The findings characterized by participant H seem to confirm the extant knowledge on this coping strategy and extend it to the boardroom context.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

We acknowledge that the ability to cope with a single event may not be resilience as it may not always involve the processes of interplay between a person and their environment (Liu et al., 2017). Therefore, in this study, we present the perspective of female board members whose stories of coping despite continued/long-term discrimination in boardrooms reveal the resilience they have developed. We find that in the top FTSE boardrooms female directors develop processes for coping with gender discrimination which change with the length of their board experience and confidence. The findings of the study reinforce and extend the theory of individual resilience (Rees et al., 2015) in the context of boardrooms which are expected to function as an effective and efficient group allowing members agency and freedom to work (Sonnenfeld, 2002), irrespective of their gender. The findings of our study also confirm that gender differences do not vanish in the top leadership positions, and the emotional and psychological cost of reaching boardrooms may be high for female leaders in the UK (Adams & Funk, 2012). We contend that the practice of gender discrimination continues in boardrooms and the flawed perception of the lack of capability in women may still be deeply embedded. Also, the findings show that both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies are adopted by female directors; their approach changes with the length of their board experience.

The findings of this study contradict the literature, which denies discrimination in British boards (e.g., Holton, 1995). We attribute the difference to a more personal and intrusive method of data collection—confidential, anonymized, face-to-face, one-to-one elite interviews—adopted in this research. Other coping strategies, as discussed in the extant knowledge on the subject (such as women emulating perceived "masculine" attributes of foul language and aggressive behavior) were not observed in this study. This again can be potentially attributed to a small sample set.

Although qualitative research is sometimes considered vulnerable to assessment of its quality and robustness, its contribution is acknowledged to be as impactful as that of quantitative research (Leung, 2015). In the study, the rigor of the findings is ensured through a robust methodology: appropriate research question, data sample, collection and analysis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2004); trustworthy interpretation of rich interview data (Lincoln et al., 2011, pp. 97–128); and transparency of the process (see Annexure 3) as recommended by Meyrick (2006).

## 7 | CONTRIBUTION, LIMITATION, AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study make several significant and unique contributions, including presenting evidence of gender discrimination through the personal accounts of female directors. There is an inherent limitation in studying corporate boards due to board members' reluctance in allowing access to researchers (McNulty & Pettigrew, 1999). The topic of gender discrimination and resilience is even more challenging to explore because such practices take place inside the "black box" (Leblanc & Schwartz, 2007) of boards, and are perpetrated by the successful male corporate elites. Women, who feel overwhelmingly obliged to have reached those echelons of decision-making, may feel, in their early board career, devoid of agency to protest against it, much less report it.

An examination of the resilience of female directors may be of significant value to aspiring women who wish to occupy the highest corporate decision-making positions. Interdisciplinary analysis of the data, and the lived experience of female directors, as presented in our findings, extend the application of theory of resilience to the less explored context of boardrooms.

Policy development has historically been a masculine forte (Taylor, 1997); therefore, in order to facilitate a level playing field in the male-dominated workplace, women need to be at the focus of policymaking (Martin & Barnard, 2013). Findings of the study seem to support the notion and indicate an underlying desire among female directors for gender-based quotas on boards, which could inform policy formulation. Additionally, findings of the study also make a case for greater representation of female directors on boards, through continuation of voluntary targets in order to address discrimination, and promote participation of women in leadership. Since the spirit of the UK governance regime is "comply or explain," coercive legislative intervention (i.e., the quota law) may not be welcomed by the UK corporate sector. However, the stock exchange can play a significant role in board compositions as done by NASDAQ in the US (Temple-West, 2020). The London Stock Exchange can demonstrate an enlightened self-regulation approach and encourage listed companies to promote a) higher gender diversity across all hierarchies; and b) device processes to prevent discrimination against female leaders. Furthermore, in order to address discrimination against women at its root and comprehensively, the education policy may proactively demolish the ascribing of gender to different roles through school curricula. Such policy will lead to a change in people's perception about women during the formative years.

The findings also suggest that the social context within which directors operate, both within and outside the boardroom, has an effect on female directors' ability to cope with the pressures of the role and to build resilience. Therefore, organizations need to be cognizant of the effect that culture and workplace practices have on the retention and development of new directors, particularly as diverse boards have been shown to have positive organizational outcomes. Board Chairs may like to explore strategies for developing female directors, who can in turn support the next generation of aspiring female directors, as part of their board training process. This will ensure that (a) more women are nominated in boards and (b) female directors have the skill, ability and the confidence to contribute in boardrooms even in their early boardroom journey. This approach has been effective in other countries such as Australia (Australian Institute of Company Directors [AICD], 2019). Furthermore, organizations may routinely carry our screening for unconscious/conscious bias and training for addressing it, across hierarchies.

Finally, findings of the study suggest that theories of resilience, particularly pertaining to coping processes, apply to boardroom contexts, and thereby improve the understanding of women's resilience in the face of gender discrimination in boardrooms. The findings of the study open the field of female directors' coping which with deeper and broader investigation may improve the understanding of the various constructs which impact those strategies—such as gender ratio on boards, female directors' background and their board experience.

Despite its unique insight into the lived experiences of women in boardrooms, this study has its limitations. This article focuses on the perspective of female directors and, hence, the findings may seem skewed. This has been done in the interest of parsimony. Additionally, as pointed out by a few participants in the study, we acknowledge that it is challenging to provide unequivocal proof of gender discrimination in boards because the behavior of an individual can be interpreted differently by different people. Yet, the presentation of female directors personal accounts is valuable as it indicates the need for course-correction. Finally, the paper, in the interest of parsimony and consistency, only explores gender discrimination and excludes other potential constructs of discrimination, such as race. Future studies may investigate gender discrimination in boardrooms with a larger data set and also explore other constructs of board diversity. We recommend that in order to reflect the dynamics in boardrooms accurately, researchers might conduct such studies in close proximity to board directors. For a sensitive topic such

as discrimination, a methodology of observation supplemented by confidential and anonymous questionnaires/surveys might glean valid and reliable information.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## ORCID

*Rita Goyal* https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3097-9494

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Rita Goyal** is Assistant Professor in Leadership at Coventry Business School, Coventry University, UK. She has more than two decades of professional background in leadership roles and doctorate research on FTSE companies' board leadership. She has published co-authored publications for academic journals and practitioners' reports on the strategic leadership of listed companies in the UK. She has a multicultural background and experience of working in emerging markets and established markets, the public and the private sectors, in the telecom industry and higher education sector. Her academic interests include Strategic decision making, Corporate governance and International Business.

**Nada K. Kakabadse**, Professor of Policy, Governance and Ethics, Henley Business School, Head of School, Marketing and Reputation, University of Reading and Visiting Professor at US, Australian, French, Kazakhstani and Chinese universities. Elected, active member, European Academy of Science and Arts (EASA) and Head of its EU Representation Office, Brussels. She has co-authored nineteen books and has published over 190 scholarly articles. Current interests are leadership, boardroom effectiveness, governance, CSR and ethics, diversity and the policy design of the state.

**Andrew** is Professor of Governance and Leadership, Henley Business School and Emeritus Professor, Cranfield School of Management. Board Member, ABIS and Winsor Leadership Trust. Visiting Professor, University of Ulster, Macquarie University, Australia. Andrew's research covers boards, top teams and the governance of governments. He has published over 45 books, 88 book chapters, over 235 articles and 18 monographs. Advisor to the UK Parliament and numerous corporations, NGOs and other governments.

**Danielle Talbot** is Associate Dean, Student Experience, Faculty of Business and Law at Coventry University, UK. She is an expert in Professional Higher Education with over 25 years' experience of working in UK Universities. She has wide-ranging experience of curriculum design, course development, quality assurance, TNE, external examiner, approval panels, scenario planning, PhD and DBA supervision, research, publications, and the leadership of a School of 110 staff. Her skill-set includes leadership, problem solving, creativity and conflict resolution.

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**ANNEXURE 1** Recruitment of participants in the study

| Participant number | Network from which they were approached | If participants led to other participant(s); Snowballed participants |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 2 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 3 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 4 | Researcher's network | No |

**ANNEXURE 1** (Continued)

| Participant number | Network from which they were approached | If participants led to other participant(s); Snowballed participants |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 5 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 6 | Researcher's network | Yes (participants 31, 32, 33, & 34) |
| Participant 7 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 8 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 9 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 10 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 11 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 12 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 13 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 14 | Researcher's network | Yes (participants 23, 25, & 26) |
| Participant 15 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 16 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 17 | School's networking opportunity | Yes (participants 17, 18, & 22) |
| Participant 18 | Snowballed from participant 16 | Yes (participant 20) |
| Participant 19 | Snowballed from participant 16 | No |
| Participant 20 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 21 | Snowballed from participant 17 | No |
| Participant 22 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 23 | Snowballed from participant 16 | No |
| Participant 24 | Snowballed from participant 13 | No |
| Participant 25 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 26 | Snowballed from participant 13 | No |
| Participant 27 | Snowballed from participant 13 | Yes (participants 27, 29, & 30) |
| Participant 28 | Snowballed from participant 26 | No |
| Participant 29 | Researcher's network | No |
| Participant 30 | Snowballed from participant 26 | No |
| Participant 31 | Snowballed from participant 30 | No |
| Participant 32 | Snowballed from participant 6 | No |
| Participant 33 | Snowballed from participant 6 | No |
| Participant 34 | Snowballed from participant 6 | No |
| Participant 35 | Snowballed from participant 6 | No |
| Participant 36 | School's networking opportunity | Yes (participants 38 & 41) |
| Participant 37 | Primary researcher's network in boards in the UK | Yes (participants 40 & 42) |
| Participant 38 | Snowballed from participant 36 | No |

(Continues)

**ANNEXURE 1** (Continued)

| Participant number | Network from which they were approached | If participants led to other participant(s); Snowballed participants |
|---|---|---|
| Participant 39 | School's networking opportunity | No |
| Participant 40 | Snowballed from participant 37 | No |
| Participant 41 | Snowballed from participant 36 | No |
| Participant 42 | Snowballed from participant 37 | No |

**ANNEXURE 2** Example of coding

| Transcript and open coding | First order codes | Second order themes |
|---|---|---|
| Participant D... and it sways struck me then...I come from finance career. I Have sat on boards as a young finance director. I Would probably be the only woman on board, and perhaps the youngest person on all-white male boards. I Always felt like a bit of an outsider. I Have always been aware of it, being a single, young, white woman in a white male environment, and what that brings in, in terms of conversation and vocabulary and ways of thinking. So, I have dealt with a lot of this in my own career. I Learned a lot of my own mechanisms of how I would approach them and how I would deal with that. So I have got a lot of experience because I have not only worked in this country but I have worked in the States. For 15 years. And I think that element gave me a whole new perspective to deal with that...I think throughout my career I have always been aware. I Have been aware of it from my own perspective being sort of single women in a white male environment. And even modern views and how you manage people will be challenged in that environment. Because women were viewed as soft and soft management style and not really being able to take that hard decisions. | Challenges of a young/female/Finance director in boards<br>All white male boards<br>Feeling like and outsider<br>Mechanism to cope<br>Exposure to other cultures and countries.<br>Adds to perspective stereotypes – Descriptive roles of women<br>Single woman on all-male boards | Challenges of a gender/functional/age minority on boards<br>Coping mechanisms – Coping and becoming resilient<br>Challenges of female board members – Socially accepted roles and attitudes. |

**ANNEXURE 3** Resilience of female directors

| Theme – Female directors' resilience | Sub-themes | Participant quotes |
|---|---|---|
| Gender discrimination in top FTSE boardrooms | Discriminatory remuneration | "I also think that it's the men who do the promotions. And I, I do feel that they are not always comfortable with female presence. Because it does shift the dynamic to have women in boardrooms." (Participant J, female, NED, CEO)<br>"I think traditionally boards have recruited like-minded people in their own image. And I think it is so important today to really recognize the unconscious bias. They don't even know about it or recognize when it coming into play. When I was |

**ANNEXURE 3** (Continued)

| Theme – Female directors' resilience | Sub-themes | Participant quotes |
|---|---|---|
| | | recruited they had, almost like quotas on female partners - they would like to keep only 25% women." (Participant D, female Chair, NED, CEO). |
| | | "And it's interesting. For my sister, he (sister's boyfriend) proposed when she was a lawyer at (law firm name). And she said 'yes, thank you, I will (marry). But only when I become a partner'. Because back then if you got married before you became a partner, the probability is that you wouldn't. Because they expect you to go on the mummy track." (Participant A, female, NED/CFO/CEO/Partner/Director – HR) |
| | Constraint on professional independence | "I was once in a situation where my boss left the company. And I was one of three directors and I wasn't even asked if I wanted to do it. And the person who was asked to do it was very much old school, part of boys club. I Like him. No, I had no issue with him. But he was mates with all of them. And when he was appointed, all these people came to me and were like 'why didn't you get that?' particularly a lot of women will come and go 'Oh (name of the participant)can't believe that you weren't promoted'! Yeah." (participant O, Female, NED/CEO/Director – Operations) |
| | Sexist comments | "I don't know how it developed but this guy (a former colleague) ended up saying that you know '*women aren't as bright as men*' or something. And she (a female colleague listening to the conversation) said *'did you really say that*?' He goes *'yeah yeah I believe this'*. You know as long as you have got the people who are thinking like that, then it says that there is a problem." (Participant K, Male, Executive Director, Director – HR) |
| Resilience of female board directors | Avoidant coping strategy – Denial | "There is certainly still bias. There is no question of it. I Still see in some chairmen. Much more in blokey, manly world of digging holes in the ground and things like that. And some of those particularly older ones still think that it is men's world and only men will understand. Or they still have this attitude that women should be home looking after the kids. They are still some of that. Not a lot, mind you, any more. You still see some of that. And that is discrimination against women." (Participant L, male, partner, CEO, CFO) |
| | Avoidant coping strategy – Disengagement | "I think I witnessed it in this non-exec arena. I Witnessed it with the things I have been invited to where I have been the only female there. Or I have been one of very few females and everyone else is in a club. And it feels like it's a club. And you feel both inadequate and you feel just out of place. Out of place and out of clubs. And you feel intimidated in that scenario. And I have left some of those events. Because I felt awkward about it. And I don't go to many things like that." (Participant P, female, ED, COO) |
| | Active coping strategy – Seeking support | "Here when I worked in London in a law firm in 1997-2000. Among 30 partners there were two female partners but they |

(Continues)

**ANNEXURE 3** (Continued)

| Theme – Female directors' resilience | Sub-themes | Participant quotes |
|---|---|---|
| | | were two new partners. They actually sued the law firm after I left for discrimination and they won." Participant N, female, NED, CEO) |
| | | "You can't shift the dial quickly enough, if there aren't enough candidates of the right quality for executive positions. But then you bring more people into the feeding line of the structure. So I think prescriptive targets is not a good idea. I Think the 30 percent club sort of thing has been a sensible kind of dynamic. I Think there is a general acceptance that 30% will be a good place to be. We probably not getting there fast enough. (Participant M, male, Chair, CEO, CMO, COO) |
| Other strategies | Feminine charm and changed appearance | Quote mentioned in the findings section of the article |

**ANNEXURE 4** Participants' attributes and response to questions on gender discrimination

| Participant number | Gender | Age (years) | Position(s) Held | Board experience (years) | Aware of/experience of gender discrimination in boards |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | M | 51 | Exec. Director | 6 | Not in boards |
| Participant 2 | M | 65 | CEO, NED, CFO | 8 | Political correctness on diversity is costing businesses |
| Participant 3/P | F | 69 | Chair | 17 | Y |
| Participant 4 | M | 59 | CEO | 7 | Discrimination cannot be escaped by minorities – need to be resilient |
| Participant 5 | M | 67 | Chair | 19 | Y |
| Participant 6 | M | 57 | CEO | 8 | Y |
| Participant 7/N | F | 65 | NED, CEO | 16 | Y |
| Participant 8/C | F | 51 | Director – Operations | 3 | Y |
| Participant 9 | F | 73 | Chairman | 20 | N |
| Participant 10/D | F | 63 | NED/CFO/CEO | 18 | Y |
| Participant 11/O | F | 55 | NED/CEO/Director – Operations | 8 | Y |
| Participant 12 | M | 53 | Exec. Director | 5 | Not in boardrooms |
| Participant 13 | M | 59 | CEO | 7 | Unconscious bias not discrimination |
| Participant 14 | F | 67 | Partner, NED, CFO | 15 | Not experienced. Others may have a different experience |

**ANNEXURE 4** (Continued)

| Participant number | Gender | Age (years) | Position(s) Held | Board experience (years) | Aware of/experience of gender discrimination in boards |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 15/H | F | 66 | NED/CEO/ED | 21 | Y |
| Participant 16/K | M | 56 | Executive Director – Director HR | 11 | Y |
| Participant 17 | M | 67 | NED/Partner/CEO | 16 | Unconscious bias |
| Participant 18 | F | 59 | CEO/Board-advisor | 10 | Y |
| Participant 19/P | F | 52 | Executive Director – COO | 5 | Y |
| Participant 20/F | F | 53 | Director HR | 3 | Y |
| Participant 21/B | F | 66 | NED/CEO/ED | 21 | Y |
| Participant 22 | M | 58 | ED/NED/CEO | 7 | Unconscious bias not discrimination |
| Participant 23/M | M | 71 | Chair, CEO, CMO, COO | 25 | Y |
| Participant 24 | M | 72 | NED/CEO/CFO/Chair | 28 | Not in boardrooms |
| Participant 25 | M | 59 | CEO | 11 | Y |
| Participant 26 | M | 73 | Chair/CEO/COO | 24 | Y – Being parent to qualified and capable daughter has changed perspective on board diversity |
| Participant 27 | M | 74 | NED/CEO | 14 | May be causing gender homogeneity |
| Participant 28/E | F | 54 | CEO/Director – Operations | 8 | Y |
| Participant 29 | M | 69 | NED/Partner/CEO | 15 | N |
| Participant 30/F | F | 57 | Director HR | 6 | Y |
| Participant 31/J | F | 64 | NED, CEO | 13 | Y |
| Participant 32 | M | 73 | Chair, CEO, CMO, COO | 27 | Y |
| Participant 33 | M | 59 | NED, CEO | 12 | Y – More commonly perpetrated by the public school educated elite male Chairs and CEOs |
| Participant 34 | M | 55 | NED/CEO | 7 | Not any more |
| Participant 35 | M | 54 | CEO | 10 | N |
| Participant 36 | M | 66 | Chairman/NED/CEO | 19 | N |
| Participant 37/L | M | 73 | Male partner, CEO, CFO | 20 | Y – Parenthood changed perspective on board diversity |

(Continues)

**ANNEXURE 4** (Continued)

| Participant number | Gender | Age (years) | Position(s) Held | Board experience (years) | Aware of/experience of gender discrimination in boards |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 38/A | F | 67 | NED/CFO/CEO/Partner/ Director – HR | 20 | Y |
| Participant 39/G | F | 64 | NED/CEO/CFO | 15 | Y |
| Participant 40/I | F | 48 | Director – Operations | 2 | N – If at all being a woman on board helps |
| Participant 41 | M | 72 | NED/Chairman | 18 | Y |
| Participant 42 | M | 56 | CEO | 5 | N |